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Miss Beck's Thanksgiving Party or, Topsy Up to Date.

By
IDA HAMILTON MUNSELL.

Dedicated to
The Woman's Club
Of Evanston, Illinois.

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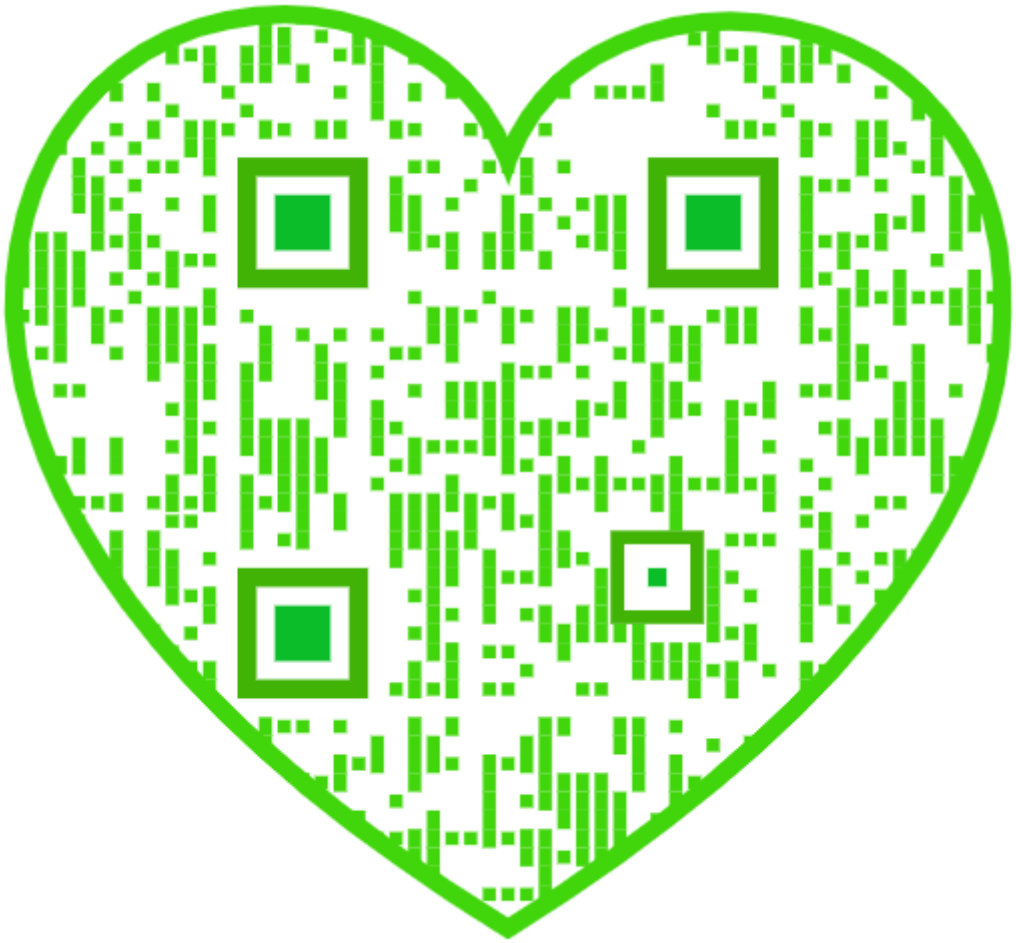

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MISS HECK'S THANKSGIVING PARTY

OR

TOPSY UP TO DATE

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To the Woman's Club
of Evanston:

Devoted, as it is, to "mutual helpfulness in all the affairs of life," and to a union of effort toward attaining the "higher development of humanity," this little brochure is dedicated by one of its members.

MISS HECK'S THANKSGIVING PARTY;

or, TOPSY UP TO DATE

IDA HAMILTON MUNSELL, B. M.

Any person with but half an eye could recognize at a glance the extraordinary character of Miss Myra Heck! And furthermore, if novelists did not show such decided preferences for white-skinned heroines, Miss Heck would long since have won the world-wide renown which of right belongs to her. But, unfortunately, Miss Myra was born of black parents away down in the sunny southland, and the dark hue of skin and wisps of woolly curls which are characteristic of the negro race have descended upon their offspring. This is the more unfortunate in that this daughter —now a young woman of twenty-four or thereabouts—is possessed of really uncommon talents, while her brain teems at all times with

schemes worthy of a French diplomat; and were she fair and dainty as to exterior, she would not now be occupying the situation of "maid of all work" in the little town where we first discovered her.

Yet, notwithstanding the accidental disadvantages which hamper this bright maid, she has managed to achieve at least local distinction in more directions than one. Few families are there in Rexville who have not at one time or another availed themselves of Miss Heck's services. Servants of any degree of ability are exceedingly rare in Rexville, so that Miss Myra could easily reign as the bright particular star in the domestic firmament of the universe, were it not for certain peculiarities of temperament, added to an ugly habit of prevaricating, together with a too confident disposition to presume upon her mistress' willingness to permit her cook to parade the streets dressed in silks and satins from her own wardrobe.

But, because of this scarcity of help, and in view of the general ability possessed by Miss Heck, her employers have shut their eyes to such peccadillos as these so

often, that by dint of much experience the young woman has at last possessed herself of such power that she rules the mistresses of Rexville with a rod of iron. She has indeed reached the conclusion that although one family may decide to forego the benefit of her assistance in their household because of some little peculiarity of hers, nevertheless she is sure of a position with some other lady on the street before twenty-four hours shall have sped. So she oscillates back and forth—like a pendulum—from one kitchen to another throughout the length and breadth of Rexville. Her period of tarrying varies according to the blindness of her mistress and the condition of the master's pocket-book, for this latter article shortly feels the drain of Miss Myra's extravagant habits, and sooner or later collapses into empty space. Then self-defense demands that the sable goddess of the cuisine depart to new fields and pastures green until such time as self-denial and rigid economy shall have once more filled the purse, and brought a return of the prosperity which had been temporarily suspended.

Thus you see that even though Miss Heck has not attained the

national reputation of which she is worthy, she has at least in one small corner of the earth won for herself glory and renown. In this little town, if nowhere else, her name is a household word. It is difficult to draw a correct word picture of this wily maid; her talents, too, are so numerous and varied that one hesitates which to portray first. Possibly, we can convey a better idea of her personality if we describe one particular scheme of hers and its outcome.

* * * * * *

It was the day before Thanksgiving, in the year of our Lord 1892, and Miss Myra sat upon the floor of her mother's dingy little parlor deeply absorbed in thought. She was working just at present for banker Holmes' people, but fortunately for herself the entire family had gone east a week before Thanksgiving in order to eat turkey in good old-fashioned comfort with relatives not seen for months. This left Miss Myra free to enjoy life to the uttermost. To be sure she carried the key to the big house in her pocket, and daily went through the pretense of airing and then dusting the premises. She

also had access to the cold storage room, which privilege augmented greatly the bill of fare at her father's shanty. Her parents had since earliest childhood greatly admired their offspring, and this ability of hers to vary the supply and quality of their edibles on occasion did not at all diminish this fond regard.

Miss Myra had enjoyed her freedom now for seven whole days; she had walked the streets at morning, noon and night, dressed always in her best, and this best was no mean style, for the young woman was possessed of a figure neat and trim, while every cent of her earnings went into clothes with which she might easily outshine the rest of the working girl population of Rexville. She had, during these past seven days, neither baked nor swept, set the table, or made the beds for anybody. In fact, she had lived an existence of unalloyed pleasure which comes from that idleness so dear to the African heart. But now she owned—to herself, at least—that she was tired. The dull monotony wearied her.

What could she do to create a new sensation? she asked herself,

while she sat with her feet crossed under her, tailor-fashion, upon the bare floor. One dingy brown hand, with its hue of pallor on the palm, moved restlessly to and fro through her crown of wool and roughened its carefully plastered locks until they stood out in grotesque tangles all about her head. At length a bright idea occurred to her; she laughed aloud; a merry chime of bells could not make sweeter music. "I'se hit it this time, sure, mammy," she called out to the woman who was bending over a steaming tub in an outer room. Her mother wiped her hands hastily upon the skirt of her gown and went into the parlor where Miss Myra yet sat upon the floor.

"Hit what, chile? What mischief has you got in dat hed of yourn dis time, I'd like to know?" she asked eagerly, as she threw her ponderous body into a chair. "Grand scheme, mammy; the best I'se had yet," announced the girl, as she slowly untangled her feet from beneath her dress and rose from the floor.

"It's bound ter be a first rate one den shuah enough, Myrie," the woman said admiringly, as she watched the supple form stretch

itself to relieve the cramped feeling of the limbs caused by her long continued crouching attitude.

"What you goin' do dis time, chile? tell your poor old mammy," the negress went on, seeing the young woman made no haste to unbosom herself of her scheme.

"Wall, then, old lady, if you *must* know, here goes! but don't let it take your bref away," the girl replied with provoking deliberateness, and she crossed the room to where a small cracked mirror hung upon the wall; here she proceeded to re-arrange her hair, holding the pins in her mouth as she did so, tantalizing yet further the anxious mother. "The longer you wait, the better it'll seem, mammy," Miss Myra said after a few moments. The old lady made no reply; she always let "Myrie" have her own way; she had found by experience that it was not easy to do otherwise. At length even the critical taste of Miss Myra seemed satisfied with the vision she beheld in the little glass, for she turned away with a contented sigh, as she did so exclaiming, "I'se gwine to give a Thanksgiving party here, mammy, tomorrer night! And it'll be a swell affair, tew, take my wurd for

it!" Then she put on her coat and hat, blew a kiss from the ends of her fingers toward the old negress yet sitting stupid with amazement in the rickety rocking-chair, and with another ringing, happy laugh went out into the storm. The sky was lead-colored, the wind blew fiercely and flung the snowflakes which were falling rapidly with spiteful force against the girl, until her heavy garments were soon hidden by a soft covering of white. But not even the fleecy crystals of snow had power to change the hue of the ebony face, and Miss Myra, who was a sensitive young woman, could not but feel a sensation of disgust as she thought, "I must look blacker than ever by contrast."

On down the street she walked rapidly; here and there she paused long enough at some house to leave an invitation for the cook or coachman to attend her Thanksgiving party; but at the end of two hours this part of her preparation was ended.

It was time, then, she decided, to turn her attention to further details of her audacious plan; and retracing her steps she soon found herself at banker Holmes' door. Here she entered, and for a

long time busied herself with necessary preparations for the morrow's festivities. As twilight fell, she closed the house once more and walked rapidly homeward. That she had not been idle, the next night's feast would show.

* * * * * *

Any one passing by Jim Heck's tumbled-down cottage Thanksgiving night would have been astonished at the number of gleaming lights flashing out upon the snow through the cracked and grimy window-panes, and would have stopped for a moment to listen to the sounds of revelry within doors. A fiddle squeaked in a lively, even if discordant fashion, while a banjo made frantic efforts to keep it company. There was a sound, too, as if of many feet dancing an old-fashioned breakdown, which made the shanty fairly tremble under the unwonted strain upon its frail supports.

The aroma of hot coffee also floated out upon the crisp air, mingled with an odor of more substantial viands, which appealed strongly to the imagination of a passing tramp who had paused to look through a window void of shade or curtain.

Suddenly the dance ended; the music ceased with one last unearthly squeak, and for the space of a single moment almost perfect silence reigned, and then it seemed as though just previously a cyclone of noise had been running riot.

At this juncture from the doorway of the combined dining-room and kitchen the host himself announced in his most gracious manner, "Supper am suhved, ladies and gemmin; choose youah pardners and walk out!"

With one hand he pulled down the draperies which had been improvised for the occasion, and which had so far kept the glories of the feast hidden from view; whilst with the other he politely motioned his guests to cross the hospitable threshold. For a second nobody stirred; a bashfulness as sudden as it was unusual seemed to have seized old and young alike. Then a tall mulatto took his late "partner" by the arm and made a hasty exit into the supper room. This was the signal for a general stampede for seats; but when the full glories of the scene impressed themselves upon the senses of the bewildered guests, each and all stood as if rooted to

the spot, staring with eyes and mouth wide open at the unexpected grandeur.

At the head of the table stood Miss Myra herself. But such a Miss Myra! Accustomed to see her always in the latest style, they had, "up to date," never beheld her attired like this.

Solomon in all his glory, the lilies of the field in their beauty, were as nothing compared to her!

She wore a trained robe of richest ivory satin, elaborately trimmed with point lace; the dusky neck and arms shone like polished ebony against the glimmering sheen of the satin.

She stood perfectly silent for a moment, her head uplifted, and with a haughty smile upon her lips, did her utmost to impress these humble admirers with this transitory grandeur.

"Yes, it jis' is indeed Mis Holmes' weddin' dress, nuffin' else, you simpletons," she said calmly, as if announcing the most commonplace fact. "An' dis yeah is her linen, and dat's her coffee; and it's her silber, too," she added calmly, as she moved her hands here and there, pointing out the objects which she named. "But

dat is nobody's business but mine; you uns has nuffin' to do but enjoy de good things I'se provided. Sit down, goosies, and let der feast proceed," she commanded in an imperious manner, and set the example by seating herself —with due regard for her long-trained gown—at the head of the table.

This proceeding elicited tumultuous applause, and from that moment until the gray dawn began to lighten the east, the fun was fast and furious.

Of all races in the world none can equal the African in its abandon of enjoyment. From the far-off homes of their ancestors, where the tropical sun forces vegetation into luxuriance and raises the blood to well-nigh fever heat, the negroes of the South have derived the power to live in and for the present only. "Foolish!" you say? Well, probably. Yet, after all, how much of human wretchedness results from either idle regrets for an unalterable past, or causeless care for an undiscoverable future? Be this as it may, at Miss Myra's Thanksgiving party shouts of laughter, bursts of negro melody, the shuffling of feet, all these sounds be-

came more and more tumultuous as the night waned.

In the early morning dusky forms might have been seen entering many a back or side door in Rexville, and many a mistress complained that day of inattention to duty; but the darkies never told the secret of their all-night festivities.

For many and many a day the glories of Miss Heck's Thanksgiving party lingered in the minds and on the tongues of the favored guests.

Upon the return of the banker's wife, that worthy lady found all her belongings in the same condition, apparently, as when she left home. Miss Myra was shrewd enough to skillfully effect this result, and if ever her conscience troubled her in reference to her late "grand ball," she always quieted its qualms by saying: "What Mis Holmes don't know ain't gwine ter hurt her none! 'Tain't right ter be selfish in dis wurld noway! If der Lawd don't make no ekal division of things, why I'll jes have ter help, an' dat's all ther is about hit!"

* * * * * *

It must have been at least a year after the occurrence before

the banker's wife learned of the party at which her possessions had played so very conspicuous and magnificent a part; and by this time Miss Heck had left her employ, being maid of all work at the parsonage, and hence beyond all need of censure from outsiders, since it was perfectly evident that her reverend employer was trying to convert this Topsy (up to date) from the error of her ways and to pluck one more brand from the burning, adding yet another jewel to his anticipated dazzlingly brilliant crown.

But at last accounts the worthy man's efforts had not met with that measure of success which usually have crowned his ministrations. Miss Heck appears to be a rather difficult "subject."

Topsy yet reigns over all the mistresses of Rexville, and condescends to work for them all in turn.

Her impartiality is sublime!

Evanston, November, 1895.

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